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AUTHOR	Markham, Reed
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ABSTRACT

Each individual views the world from a frame of reference that is unique and personal. Messages are perceived in three steps: (1) data is selected data; (2) information is organized in some meaningful way; and (3) the information is interpreted. Three activities (paperfolding, T-puzzle, and cooperative geometry) were devised to display the need for clear communication between the sender and the receiver. All three activities demonstrate that framing for understanding, and understanding others' frames is absolutely necessary for effective communication. Non-verbal communication can also be understood or misunderstood, and varies according to cultural, ethnic and sexual orientation. By definition, communication is the transmission or exchange of ideas or information. In communication, the transactions between individuals are affected in varied degrees by the dominant ego states (parent, adult, child). A balance between these ego states makes for a healthy person with whom productive communication can take place. (T-puzzle pieces and the cooperative geometry design are attached.) (MG)

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FRAME OF REFERENCE: COMMUNICATING WITH UNDERSTANDING ESSAY AND EXERCISES

REED MARKHAM

COMMUNICATION DEPARTMENT
CALIFORNIA STATE POLYTECHNIC
UNIVERSITY
3801 WEST TEMPLE AVENUE
POMONA, CA 91768
(714) 987-5277

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FRAME OF REFERENCE:
COMMUNICATION WITH UNDERSTANDING

Walter Lippmann stated: "For the most part we do not see first and then define; we define first and then see." This statement reflects one of the most common barriers to effective communication. We can talk to each other for hours and not fully understand each other. We can also communicate simple directions to a group of people and end up with a variety of outcomes.

Each of us views the world from a frame of reference that is unique and personal. When we perceive a message, we go through a basic three step process. We are usually given more stimuli than we can manage, so we select the data that attracts our attention. We select data that is interesting, or is emphasized, or maybe because it was repeated.

After we select the data, we organize the information in some meaningful way. We usually classify items and put them into categories. Following our classifying of a communication message, we apply meaning to it. This third step is called interpretation. Each communication message can be interpreted in a number of ways. There are many factors that cause us to interpret messages the way we do.

Our frame of reference includes all of our past experiences. A communication message may be similar to one that we received a few weeks earlier. We also make assumptions about human behavior. If you feel that people are basically good, then this statement will shape the way you interpret other people's actions.

We each have certain expectations about other people or events. Our anticipation of a message can distort its true meaning. We are also guided by our knowledge of an object, person or event. This knowledge, along with personal moods we may be experiencing, can color our interpretation of a communication.

To remove communication barriers effectively, the sender of a message needs to draw from his or her frame of reference the words and ideas that would be in common with the receiver's frame of reference. When two or more people communicate without a common frame of reference, the communication can become difficult.

To improve our framing as a sender and as a receiver of communication, we need to remember to not jump to conclusions. This statement means to avoid generalizing or drawing conclusions based on weak evidence. Even though you hear a communication one way does not mean that it will always have the same meaning. It is better to suspend judgment, especially about a message that is communicated in a vague, unclear manner, until you receive more information. The new evindence or information should be placed in context with the old information.

Understanding of a message is also enhanced by the proper climate. The communication should be sent in an environment based on truth, honesty and trust. We need to achknwledge that we each view the world differently. If our perception of a message is incorrect, we need to be willing to adjust our views in light of the new information.

Communications in a paperforlding activity

When we deliver verbal or written communications we need to make sure that the receiver of the communication understands what is said, and can respond in an efficient manner. Both simple and complex forms of communication can be difficult for a receiver to understand. Therefore, it is important that the sender of the communication take into consideration the frame of reference of the receiver. Without good framing, the communication can move in many directions and result in confusion and difficulty.

To simulate a communication situation in which the sender and the receivers of the commuication operate only from their own frame of reference, we have devised a paperfolding activity. The leader instructs a group of students to hold a sheet of paper in front of them, close their eyes, and fold the paper in half; then tear off the upper right corner of the paper. Still with their eyes closed, the students are then instructed to fold the paper again and tear off the lower left corner. They are asked to open their eyes and unfold the paper and hold it up for everyone to see. Most likely, there are as many versions of paper cuts are there are students.

This activity illustrates how even simple directions can lead to totally different results if the sender and the receiver of the communication do not share the same frame of reference. It also shows that people in an organization may each go their own separate ways if there is no common frame and understanding of the organization's goals and objectives.

Giving instructions to solve the T-Puzzle

Even the best communicators fail in their instruction if they don't consider the frame from which their pupils, subordinates or co-workers operate. To demonstrate the effects of a one-sided or downward instruction or communication, we have devised a puzzle-solving exercise.

The manager on one side and a group of subordinates on the other side of a screen have an identical puzzle before them. The manager's puzzle is solved while the subordinates' puzzle is scrambled. The manager's task is to give clear instructions to his subordinates on how to place the puzzle pieces, so that they can complete it in a reasonable time frame.

Everyone knows that the puzzle pieces are identical in shape, but they don't know that they are not alike in color. The difference in color intents to illustrate the different frames from which people operate.

Another twist to the game is, that besides the manager's instruction, no one is allowed to talk, either with the manager or with the other co-workers. This intents to simulate the practice of little communication between the manager and co-workers, other than orders from above.

As the manager proceeds with clear instructions, from his point of view, on how to solve the puzzle, the subordinates are not getting the results they know they should get. They slowly become frustrated by (from their point of view) the manager's unclear instructions. Not only do they become frustrated, but the manager starts to lose his patience as well, as he does not understand why his subordinates don't understand him and follow his instructions as he is giving them.

Unless a manager recognizes early in the game that the colors might not match the puzzle pieces, and therefore stresses only the description of the shapes, it is unlikely that the subordinates solve the puzzle in a short time. Sometimes, an independent and inventive subordinate decides that the instructions are not useful and tries to solve the puzzle independently without listening to the manager's instructions. In any case, the game in most instances proves to be a very frustrating experience.

The result of this game illustrates that one-way communication with no regard to the frame of the subordinates does not work. It also illustrates how it can frustrate both sides equally, especially when the subordinates never even think about the fact that the manager might also operate from a different frame of reference.

In order for a task to be performed efficiently and to the satisfaction of all, a two-way channel of communication between the manager and the subordinates must exist. In addition, the relationship between the manager and his subordinates should rest on the basis of trust, so that the subordinates could feel comfortable enough to tell the manager that they don't understand him or a certain set of instructions, so that they could discuss the problem with a mutual interest for solving it.

Communication in a group using cooperative geometry

To perform a task in a group can be very efficient, as well as a rewarding experience, if the members of the group operate within the same frame. However, if the members of a group each operate from a different frame, form cliques or have either no time or interest to understand the others' frames, it can be a frustrating experience.

To demonstrate the veracity of this notion, we have prepared a group activity called "cooperative geometry". This activity helps to focus attention on what needs to take place in a group in order to complete a task which requires cooperation. Each of four team members receives three geometric shapes, coded as 3A, 3B, 3C or 3D. When all the pieces are put together, they form four separate and equal squares. (see attached)

There are three rules that make the task a little more difficult: 1) one may not talk, 2) one may not take a piece from another, but 3) one may give a piece to another. By eliminating verbal communication, we can observe how the group is handling its communication - the focus can be on the group process, not the content. No member can "take charge" in a verbal manner, and thus attention can be given to examining what people do in a group, and how people in the group feel and act when unable to assume a particular leadership style under normal conditions. By eliminating the opportunity to take a piece from another,

participants are forced into a helping mode of operation which may or may not be comfortable for them.

One or two people may be observers, so that after the activity feedback can be provided to the group concerning their interaction and communication patterns. The observers complete an evaluation sheet with the following information:

Name,
Number of times talked,
Number of times tried to take a piece,
Number of times gave a piece,
Number of times directed to give a piece,
Observed leadership style,
Actual leadership style.

It is hypothesized that those who have an Assertive-tough-battler (red) style, according to the Strength Deployment Inventory, would talk more often and attempt to take or direct others to give geometry pieces. Analytical (green) style leaders would tend to try to do the task by themselves and would thus want to take pieces, or not take part at all. The Friendly Helpers (blue) would talk more and give more pieces to others.

Invariably, the group will cooperate to accomplish two or three squares, and then finally realize that all squares will have to be broken and redone in order to include the fourth person's square.

After the activity questions to the team members might include:

1) How did you feel when someone held a piece and did not see the solution? (How do you feel when someone in a work group does not share information that could contribute to problem completion?)
2) What was your reaction when someone finished his/her solution and then sat back without recognizing that his or her solution prevented others from solving the problem? (How do you feel when someone frames a situation from his/her viewpoint and is unable to see yours?)

3) What were your feelings when you finished your square and then realized that you would have to break it up and give it away? (How do you feel when you realize that the way you have framed something is incorrect or counterproductive?)
4) Was there an atmosphere in your group that helped or hindered you in finding the solution? (Do the variety of "frames" within a group cause difficulty in problem solving and resolution?)
5) How did your particular leadership style assist or interfere with task completion?
6) Were you able to follow the three rules?
7) What might happen if a group consisted of all "reds," "blues" or "greens?"

An analogy can be drawn between the kind of collaboration needed to complete this activity and framing for understanding. Framing for power would be counterproductive for this group task. In group work where success of a project depends on cooperation, there needs to be an awareness of the importance of open communication that allows one to understand another's frame of reference, and a willingness to suspend one's leadership style, or find alternative ways to constructively operate within one's particular frame.

All three activities demonstrate that framing for understanding, and understanding others' frames is absolutely necessary for effective communication. And effective communication is usually the foundation of any successful organization.

Framing non-verbal communication

Just as verbal communication, non-verbal communication can be understood or misunderstood, depending on the frame of reference used. Research has shown that over 70% of all communication is unspoken communication. Those subtle nuances, gestures and tones

lend meaning and flavor to the words we speak. They also vary according to cultural, ethnic and sexual orientations. Non-verbal communication (body language) is as important in business settings as anywhere.

Much has been written about communication styles in other cultures, and how they differ from Western style. For example, in some cultures it is considered impolite to look at someone directly when speaking. Westerners misinterpret this trait as a lack of forthrightness, as we tend to look people "straight in they eye." In Japan, where politeness is relegated to a high art, smiling is not considered an expression of showing pleasure, but rather an expression of amusement, confusion or embarrassment. Potentially disasterous misunderstandings could occur in a business meeting if a Westerner misinterprets a Japanese smile as a form of acquiescence. Similarly, nodding may mean "I understand" and "I hear you," but it does not mean "I agree with you."

We, as communicators, are divided into three basic groups, Visual, Auditory and Kinetic. Often, how well one understands depends to which of these senses the communication appeals. Visual learners respond to messages that evoke images. Auditory learners react to words and phrases; and kinetic learners essentially learn by doing. They respond to physical images and words. If you are trying to get a point across to someone, and you're not getting anywhere, you may be "speaking" to the wrong sense.

Perhaps, the most interesting differences are those between sexes. Men and women often have very different communication styles; and there is a lot of misinterpreted information transmitted because of it. A woman may feel confident and smile a lot, while a man may interpret frequent smiles as an act of submission. Women tend to convey more of themselves through more animated behavior, eye contact, gestures, facial expressions and a wider range of voice pitch and intonations. Because of this

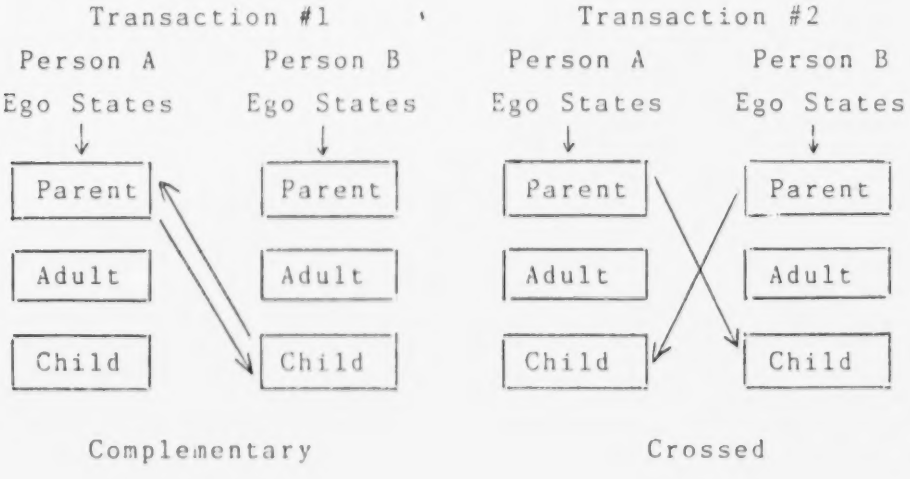
behavior, women are often perceived as more emotional and less authoritative.

Whatever the non-verbal communication or body language may be, if the people involved are not from the same frame, it may be grossly misunderstood, and even bring the verbal communication connected to it to a halt.

The psychological background of framing

To further understand a person's frame of mind or frame of reference, one can attempt this by referring to the three ego states of parent, adult and child. By definition, communication is the transmission or exchange of ideas or information. In communication, the transactions between individuals are affected by the dominant ego states in varied degrees. A balance between these three ego states makes for a healthy person with whom productive communication can take place.

There are many combinations of complementary and crossed transactions. The following diagram illustrates a complementary and a crossed communications transaction.

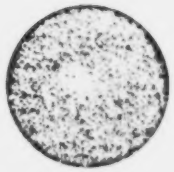


When in transaction #1, person A makes a statement to person B in a critical parent manner, and B responds in his child ego manner, a completed communication takes place, and information is shared with minimum effort. The crossed transaction results in the closing of communication. The sender can feel misunderstood or even threatened when the receiver responds in a crossed manner as illustrated in transaction #2.

Complementary transactions produce expected and predictable responses which are conducive for continued communication; however, crossed transactions produce responses that are out of context with what the sender intends to communicate. Managers who have good self-perceptions relating to roles, goals and objectives evoke a behavior that produces a good balance of parent-adult-child ego states.

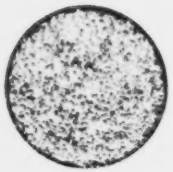
This may seem a simplistic way to approach framing, but if team building and open dialogue are organizational goals, then managers must develop good framing skills. For successful, creative and imaginative management, emphasis should be placed on creating teams whose members complement rather than replicate each others styles.

Developing a frame and clearly representing it to coworkers enables one to become more effective in communication and thus in management of or within an organization. Perceiving and understanding other people's frames is equally important. Whether one is framing for power or framing for understanding, it is necessary to communicate one's frame in order to achieve the intended goal.



Blue

Red



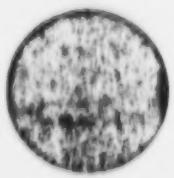
Yellow

White

T - Puzzle

Manager's pieces

13



Green

14

Red

Green

Blue

White

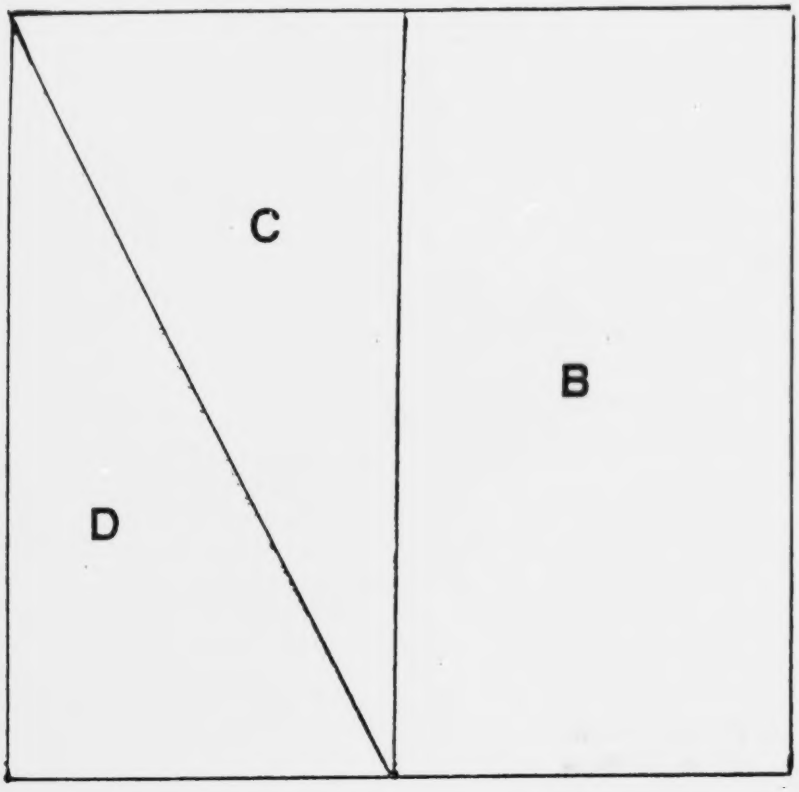
T = Puzzle

Subordinate's pieces

Yellow

15

16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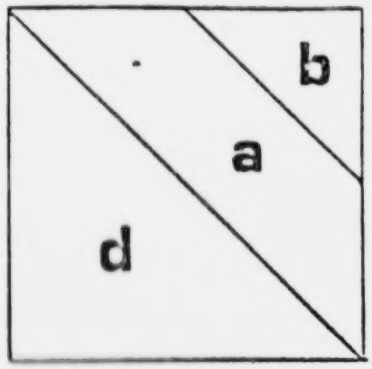
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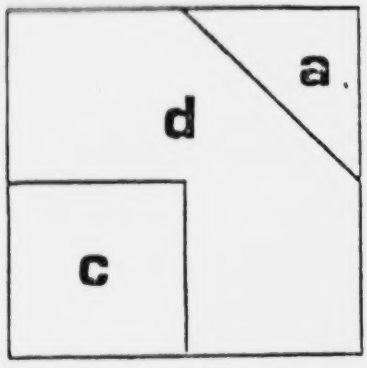
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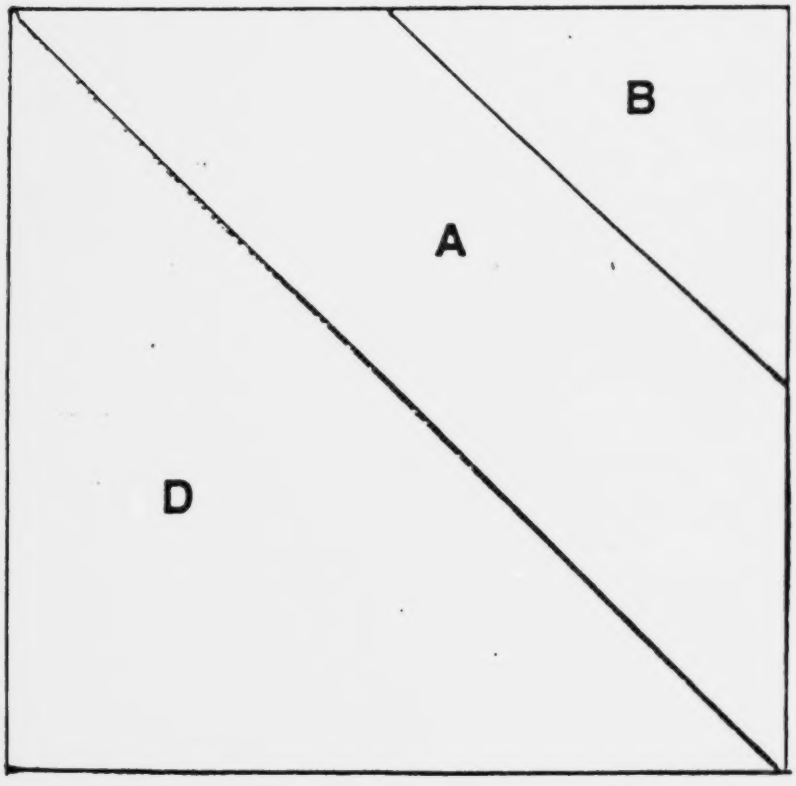
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A
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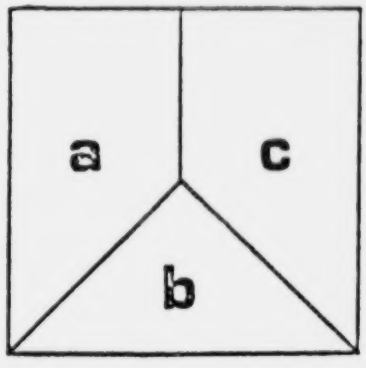
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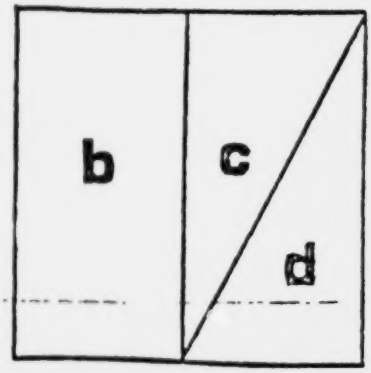
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